DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 399 CS 217 080

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TITLE	Textual Orientations: Gay and Lesbian Students and the Making of Discourse Communities.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English (Warwick, England, July 7-10, 1999).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.nyu.edu/education/teachlearn/ifte/amanda1.htm.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Environment; *Discourse Communities; Higher Education; Homophobia; *Homosexuality; Student Characteristics; Student Rights; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

For Peter Elbow, a writing classroom should be an opportunity for students to tell their stories to a community in which everyone is safe to take risks, and all support each other in the development of their expressive skills. To be "other," however, is always a scary thing. The lesbian, gay, or bisexual writing student is usually seen as having a choice of being "in the closet" or "in your face." She must size up every situation she enters: classroom, social, workplace, health care provider, etc., and determine how safe it is to reveal her true identity. What can courses in queer pedagogy do to address the issue of homophobia in the academy? For instance, the whole notion of a course designed specifically to address the issues of an oppressed group strikes many members of the dominant population as a deliberate stepping outside the mainstream to further delineate existing social divisions. Elbow refers to a "dangerous audience" but does not specify what makes it so. Any writing classroom that is not specifically lesbian and gay oriented holds potential danger for the lesbian or gay writer. For them, a dangerous audience is often made up of peers who have never had the opportunity to consider homosexuals as fellow members of the human race. The writing teacher can make a significant difference in establishing the classroom as a safe space, but only if the rights of students who occupy the margins are acknowledged by the teacher before they have to come out. What Harriet Malinowicz gave her students in the two courses she offered about gay issues and described in her book "Textual Orientations" would permanently strengthen students' identities and their voices as writers. (NKA)

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Textual Orientations: Gay and Lesbian Students and the Making of Discourse Communities.

by Amanda Nicole Gulla

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Textual Orientations:
Gay and Lesbian Students and the Making of Discourse Communities

> "*...virtually everyone has available great skill with words. That is, everyone can, under certain conditions, speak with clarity and power. These conditions usually involve a topic of personal importance and an urgent occasion.*" –Peter Elbow, Writing With Power, p.7

As an enthusiastic writer always in search of an opportunity to learn powerful techniques for teaching writing, I was excited when I read what Peter Elbow had written. Yes, this was what a writing classroom should be, an opportunity for students to tell their stories to a community in which everyone is safe to take risks, and all support each other in the development of their expressive skills. It is not that I was looking for a forum for confessional writing. Rather, I felt that by "speaking with clarity and power", about "a topic of personal importance", writing students would have the opportunity to portray the universality of their lives, and both readers and writers could come to understand something about the universality of all lives. In my mind, the Elbowian classroom was a miniature utopian society. If we could get kids to write, I further reasoned, we could address a whole array of social ills, from violence to political apathy. By finding and sharing their voices as writers, students could open each others' minds.

Armed with this rosy outlook, I took a course with the New York City Writing Project in the summer of 1989. I was right at home. The instructors were using the very techniques Elbow had written about in Writing Without Teachers. One of the two instructors was even a gay man. I hadn't come into the class thinking about coming out. I was just excited about getting down to the serious business of writing, which I had abandoned for many years. Nor were the instructors urging us to tell our personal stories. They merely made it clear that they would tolerate nothing less than an atmosphere in which anyone felt safe to write anything they wanted to. Something in the writing prompts led me to begin drafting a fictionalized account of a teenage girl's coming out. I wrote with the gusto of someone who'd been starving for the experience and didn't even know it. The following day we were split into response groups of four, in which we remained for the duration of the four week course. I began to notice that one man in my group turned his

back whenever I read my work. I decided to ignore his hostility. The writing he brought in seemed to hold encoded messages, about a man who harbored violent feelings toward a "loudmouthed bitch". I gamely continued to share my writing, which grew more and more explicit as I got into it. The man in my group never said anything directly to me, but his writing also grew increasingly graphic. Nobody ever addressed the issue openly until the course was over. I accepted his attitude at the time and began to dread group time in the class, because it didn't occur to me that I could do anything about it. Still, I wouldn't allow it to silence me. I had written powerfully despite a hostile classmate, because I had confidence in my writing ability and in the fact that I was mostly surrounded by fairly liberal schoolteachers, who took the stance of admiring my courage and honesty. (Whether they really felt that way, or just thought they were supposed to).

The man in my writing group was an adult, a teacher, as I was. Had he and I been teenagers in a high school or undergraduate classroom, I might not have felt so confident about the safety of writing in an openly lesbian voice. To be "other" is always a scary thing. As an other whose "otherness" must be deliberately revealed in order to be known, the lesbian, gay, or bisexual writing student is usually seen as having a choice of being "in the closet" or "in your face". She must size up every situation she enters: classroom, social, workplace, health care provider, etc. and determine how safe it is to reveal her true identity.

In an effort to address the issue of homophobia in the classroom, Harriet Malinowitz designed two courses which she describes in her book Textual Orientations. One was called Writing About Lesbian and Gay Experience, and was offered at a large private university in New York City that she calls Cosmopolitan University. The other, Writing About Lesbian and Gay Issues, was offered at a public New York City college she refers to as Municipal College. Both were honors courses, therefore students came with a relatively high level of writing competency. Both courses were open to all sexual orientations. Significantly, the only group absent from both courses was heterosexual males.

What can courses in queer pedagogy do to address the issue of homophobia in the academy? Mary, a student of Malinowitz's at Cosmopolitan University says: "I don't carefully put my (gay) books away anymore…I wear my t-shirts and buttons where people can see them." For John: "Gay is a life, not a life-style. It is not an orientation or a fixation. It is not the opposite of straight…I am most comfortable with the term identity." These students had the opportunity to consider what it is to be gay, and as a result found a greater sense of identity and belonging. They also became less afraid to be open about their identities.

Many would suggest that inclusion would be much more effective. The whole notion of a course designed specifically to address the issues of an oppressed group strikes many members of the dominant population as a deliberate stepping outside the mainstream to further delineate existing social divisions. In fact, Malinowitz offers these courses as a precursor to inclusion pedagogy. As she suggests:

> Mere 'inclusion', which is widely practiced as the incorporation of material about one more social group into a smorgasbord of diversity to be 'celebrated', renders impossibly simple the experience of the margin, which is a site both of …disempowerment and electrifying resistance.

She further goes on to say that the very attitude of well intentioned acceptance tends to stop the writer cold in a way that she might not be able to clearly name. Seldom is a heterosexual writer telling the story of her first love or some other defining moment told how brave she is simply for writing her story. The student is denied the challenge to explore both the issues she is writing about, and the skill with which she writes with any depth.

It brings to mind a memory of attending a gay pride parade with my girlfriend and her heterosexual sister. The sister kept commenting that she had nothing to be ashamed about, that it didn't bother her in the least to be surrounded by gay people.

Finally, I could contain my irritation no longer. "Thank you", I said, "I'm not ashamed of you either." Malinowitz discusses the whole notion of gay "pride" as in reality being relief over liberation from shame. Her suggestion that: "The more one overcomes one's internalized homophobia, the more one's 'pride' (and the need for it) may wither away." (p. 267) rings true as one realizes that it is not the condition of sexual orientation that engenders pride, but the ability to attain self-acceptance and integrity in the face of homophobia, whether it be from within or without.

The young lesbian or gay writer may be confused in the predominantly heterosexual classroom in which she is apparently accepted. Comments like "Thank you for your honesty", and "You're certainly very brave", are a double-edged sword. They tend to emphasize feelings of otherness in the writer, and the unspoken message is to abandon all hope of really being understood as a member of a peer group of writers.

Malinowitz refers to this response to coming out statements in the liberal pluralist academy as the "expressionist response", which she describes as "applause and affirmation". They suggest a granting of permission to be for the student who is not straight or white or male. It is perhaps this sense of being "allowed" to speak truthfully, as if one had to ask, that gives the marginalized student the sense that she or he exists at the behest of his or her peers. Of course, in the wake of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, this is no small assumption.

Peter Elbow recognized that a writer can be silenced by what he calls a "dangerous audience": "When you experience an audience as dangerous:

a. it may make you so anxious that you actually cannot write at all, or
b. it may make you merely nervous, preoccupied with the mistakes you might make, unable to find words naturally and smoothly, and hence, unable to concentrate easily on your thoughts; or
c. it may not inhibit words or thoughts, but lead you into a protective voice which makes you feel safer, but drains your language of power." (p. 187)

While Elbow doesn't specify what makes an audience dangerous, any writing classroom that is not specifically lesbian and gay oriented holds potential danger for the lesbian or gay writer. The "applause and affirmation" of the "expressionist response" Malinowitz refers to may offer some relief from fear of hostility, but it does not invite the writer to engage in deep exploration of her topic. Elbow suggests that the writer confronted with a real or imagined "dangerous audience" ignore audience in writing early drafts. This may help the writer who has no intention of sharing, or the writer whose fear of a dangerous audience is unfounded, but even putting aside the real danger of an overtly homophobic audience, it ignores the loneliness of the pat on the head that makes the lesbian or gay writer feel like a dancing poodle, valued only because she dares to get up on her hind legs.

For the lesbian or gay student, a dangerous audience is often made up of peers who have never had the opportunity to consider homosexuals as fellow members of the human race. Upon viewing a PBS documentary entitled: "It's Elementary: Dealing With Lesbian and Gay Issues in the Primary and Secondary Classroom", it was quite clear that the teachers and administrators who chose to address the issue of what it really means to be gay were doing so to foster an atmosphere of tolerance for all concerned. As one teacher put it, "We need to teach kids that people just are. That nobody has the right to judge what another person is. You don't have to like them, just let them be." In the United States, there are schools scattered here and there that do specifically include lesbian and gay people in their multicultural studies program, but they are few and far between.

Malinowitz tells us that her reasons for establishing lesbian and gay themed writing classes is rooted in uncommon sense, a concept described in John Mayher's 1990 book of that same title, "in which the learner is motivated by a sense of personal investment in what is learned". (Malinowitz, p. 136)

She further cites the class' fluid approach to identity as an uncommonsense notion. One student who began the class firmly asserting her heterosexuality expressed fear that she

would be challenged by an out lesbian teacher who would doubt her self-proclaimed identity because of her very presence in a lesbian and gay themed class. Because her self-definition was accepted, she felt comfortable in the class, and eventually came out as bisexual during the course of the semester. While the express purpose of the courses was not to help students come to terms with their sexual identities, the emphasis on self definition rather than an external set of criteria to establish sexuality allowed for a greater comfort level for such a student than she could have found at a Gay Students' Organization, for example.

There is an inherent tension in the idea of lesbian and gay themed writing classes. The practice of offering a course specifically designed to address lesbian and gay themes can be compared to, for example, in America, Black History Month takes place during February, which is noticeably the shortest month of the year. This is only necessary because general history courses fail to adequately highlight the achievements of people of African descent. Well-intentioned inhabitants of the mainstream are eager to agree with this assertion, suggesting that a more equitable solution would be to remedy this lack in the history books (and literature courses, film, and television industries, etc.), rather than set up what white folks (read men, heterosexuals, gentiles, anyone comfortably occupying the center of the page), see as dangerously divisive, and perpetuating and perhaps even deepening prejudice. Worse still, for occupants of the mainstream, courses and institutions intended to place the marginalized at the center are seen as holding the potential to encourage "reverse prejudice". For those who have not experienced outsiderhood, there is an unwillingness to walk through the transitional steps many of us see as necessary if we are ever to arrive at a place of full equality. They may fail to see that there is no movement from the margins to a place of full inclusion without each group having the opportunity to place itself at the center.

Elbow's view of the writer as having a unique inner truth to express removes writing from its social context. Malinowitz takes issue not with Elbow's strategies for teachers and students of writing, but in his glossing over of the question of what happens to

the writer who genuinely risks vilification by telling her most interesting and meaningful story. But can the writing classroom ever be any safer than the world it occupies? People will come with their preconceived notions, and challenging them can be a full curriculum in and of itself. It is taken for granted by the majority that the very concept of equal protection for lesbian and gay people is controversial. Why should anyone's rights be controversial, as if they were (and indeed they are), a matter of debate?
It is in this context that an eighteen year old, as confused, insecure, and enthusiastic as any other eighteen year old publicly reveals a story about coming to terms with a major aspect of his or her identity. And he or she can imagine Elbow's dangerous audience saying, "Why do you have to make such a big deal about it?" or "Who you sleep with is your own business," or "My religion tells me it's wrong," or, perhaps worse than any of these, silence and a turned back.

Malinowitz seems to feel left out in the cold by Elbow and the other romantics, who ignore the dilemma of the true outsider in the writing classroom. I believe she also recognizes the enormity of the problem of homophobia, and does not propose that her course would succeed in eradicating it. Rather, I think it is her attempt to find out what would happen to writing students if she could create an atmosphere that was free of homophobia. The next logical question then becomes how to create such an atmosphere without having to create a lesbian and gay themed class. Again, we can return to the notion of fluid identity as one answer. Another element is to make sure the texts assigned in class reflect the value of inclusion.

The writing teacher can make a significant difference in establishing the classroom as a safe space, but only if the rights of students who occupy the margins are acknowledged by the teacher before they have to come out. Lesbian and gay people are used to having to remind the world of their existence. These declarations are usually preceded by a sharp intake of breath, and a girding of the loins for potential battle. This posture can handicap a writer's fluidity like a suit of armor would a runner. There is an alternative argument, that living as an outsider can energize a writer. Certainly, one can cite many examples of people whose very marginalization galvanized them into action that immortalized them.

Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Harvey Milk all possessed rare courage and charisma that are probably not found in a typical classroom. And how many students, charismatic or not, are willing to risk the assassin's bullet? Every gay or lesbian person has a story close to his or her heart of a name called, a bottle thrown, a face smashed into a locker, a young man tied to a fence and left to die. If Malinowitz offered nothing more than a safe haven for some students in which to write, even that was of value. But what she gave these particular students would permanently strengthen their identities and their voices as writers. Perhaps she offers the rest of us some clues as to how to render the writing classroom safer for students who write from the margins. As another of her students wrote in her final essay for the class:

If we learned anything this semester, it was how our writing puts us in a position to be an activist of a sort, queer defenders with powerful pens…I have written about queer topics before coming to this class but I have never felt as empowered by my writing as I have come to feel in this class.

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